

Independent autopsy rules death of Georgia prisoner who was “eaten alive” by lice and bed bugs a homicide

Jacob Crosse
24 May 2023

On Monday, attorneys for the family of Lashawn Thompson, a Georgia resident who died in the barbarous Fulton County Jail last September, revealed disturbing new findings of an independently commissioned autopsy report.

The upsetting images released by the Thompson family lawyers earlier this year showing the African American man covered in bed bugs and languishing in a filthy jail cell shocked and angered millions of people in the US and internationally.

As of this writing no charges have been filed against any of the jail staff responsible for Thompson’s death.

While the horrifying images of Thompson illustrated the inhumane conditions millions of prisoners, many of whom have never been convicted of a crime, are forced to endure in the US, the photos also shattered self-serving claims by capitalist politicians that the US government upholds “human rights” in America, Ukraine or anywhere else on the planet. The death of Thompson, and hundreds of others in police custody every year including immigrant children, are not anomalies, but a morbid regularity.

At the press conference on Monday, lawyers for the Thompson family explained that they needed to commission an additional autopsy report after the one conducted by the Fulton County government last year listed Thompson’s death as “undetermined.” The new examination, attorney Benjamin Crump confirmed, was paid for by former San Francisco 49ers quarterback and social justice activist Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick was blackballed from the NFL in 2016 after he protested against police violence by kneeling during the playing of the national anthem.

Unlike that previous autopsy report, the new report, authored by Dr. Roger Mitchell, professor and chair of

pathology at Howard University College of Medicine, was assertive and blunt in its findings.

Dr. Mitchell wrote, “it is the opinion of this forensic pathologist that Mr. Lashawn Thompson died due to severe neglect. The combination of dehydration, rapid weight loss, and malnutrition complicated by untreated decompensated schizophrenia led to a fatal cardiac arrhythmia of Lashawn Thompson.”

Dr. Mitchell added that the “inactions of Mr. Thompson’s caregivers are directly related to his death; therefore the cause of death should be listed as *Complications due to Severe Neglect* with the contributing cause stated as *Untreated Decompensated Schizophrenia*.”

“Lastly, the manner of death designation of *Homicide* most accurately describes the circumstances around the death of Lashawn Thompson” (emphasis in original).

After reviewing the few medical records maintained at the jail in conjunction with his own findings, Dr. Mitchell determined that Thompson lost 32 pounds in less than 90 days while he was incarcerated for allegedly spitting on a cop, and that Thompson had not received any medical treatment for at least 40 consecutive days preceding his death.

In addition to severe malnutrition and dehydration, Dr. Mitchell observed an “extensive and severe body insect infestation,” including an “innumerable number of insects” found on Thompson’s “head hair, face, facial hair, nose, mouth, chest, pubic area, arms and legs.”

Dr. Mitchell noted the severe infestation of “lice ... blood sucking ecto-parasites” was “another marker of neglect.” Since the full life cycle of lice is only 24–28 days, and they cannot live without blood, the presence of so many lice and lesions indicated to Dr. Mitchell that Thompson had been infested with lice for more than 28 days.

“During that time it took to accumulate the severe and substantial infestation, Mr. Thompson would not have received a bath from his caregivers,” wrote Dr. Mitchell, adding, “It is possible that Lashawn Thompson suffered anemia from the enormous presence of body lice.”

Notably, a toxicology report conducted by Dr. Mitchell found that Thompson was not receiving previously prescribed medication for his diagnosed schizophrenia. While it appears Thompson was seen by a medical provider and given his medication within 24 hours of being arrested on June 12, 2022, beginning on July 27, 2022, Dr. Mitchell observed “a significant gap in the documented health care provision” that lasted until September 8, 2022.

While records in June and July noted that Thompson was “alert” and his cell was “clean” after the 43-day “gap” in the records, on September 9, LT NaphCare medical records (the private company the Fulton County Jail contracts with) documented that Thompson was “lying in the fetal position on the floor” and that his room was “unkept [sic] and malodorous.” While the records claim Thompson was put on “psych observation” it does not appear Thompson was ever transferred out of his cell to a medical health clinic.

Homicidal neglect is routine in the American carceral system. On Tuesday, the *Tributary* reported on the case of 54-year-old Dexter Barry, a Jacksonville, Florida, man who died last year after being denied his anti-rejection medications for a recent heart transplant while he was jailed on a misdemeanor arrest charge, according to Andrew Bonderud, a Jacksonville civil rights lawyer that is representing the Barry family.

Barry was jailed on November 18 after his neighbor called the police to report that Barry had threatened him. The two men, who shared a wifi connection, had been arguing for weeks over an unpaid bill, however none of their confrontations, including the last one, ever turned physical. Nevertheless, Barry was charged with simple assault for verbal threats and transported to the Duval County Jail shortly after noon on November 18.

During his arrest and transport to the Duval County Jail, Barry informed Jacksonville Sheriff’s Officer Jacob McKeon “at least seven times that he needed to take his anti-rejection medications every day to survive” the *Tributary* wrote after reviewing body camera footage.

While jails typically do not allow inmates to bring in their own medication, given the urgent need in this case, Dexter’s son Dexter Barry Jr. told the *Tributary*, “The police officer could’ve gone inside and got his

medication. This man is telling you, my heart needs those meds. A two-minute walk would’ve saved his life.”

The police officer refused to give Barry his medication. Over 24 hours after his arrest, on November 19 in front of Judge Gilbert Feltel, Barry again reiterated the importance of taking his medication.

“I just had a heart transplant, and I haven’t taken my medicine all day since I have been locked up, and I take rejection medicines for my heart so my heart won’t reject it, and I’m almost two years out,” Barry told the judge. Judge Feltel responded by setting a \$503 bond, which kept Barry in jail for two days. Upon being picked up from the jail, Barry Jr. recalled his dad telling him, “I didn’t get my meds.”

Barry Jr. told the *Tributary*, that after coming out of the jail his father, “didn’t sound like himself, and he had shortness of breath.” Three days later, Barry called his home health nurse to report he had fallen and could not get up. When the nurse arrived at his home, he called 911 and Barry was transported to UF Health Jacksonville where he died.

The hospital refused to perform an autopsy, which forced the family to set up a GoFundMe to crowdfund the costs. After raising a few thousand dollars, the autopsy performed by Dr. Jose Suarez Hoyos revealed that the “cause of death of this patient is cardiac arrest as supplied by the clinical history, most probably due to severe autoimmune reaction to the myocardium, coronary arteries, endocardium and soft tissues.”

Barry had received a new heart in October 2020 after waiting on a transplant list for 12 years. For two years he regularly took his anti-rejection medication. But after he was arrested on November 18, Bonderud asserts that police refused to provide medication to his client because of the high cost of the pills: \$2,400 for a 30-day supply.

“Records from jail will likely show they made a note of it,” Bonderud told *The Tributary*. “JSO (Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office) recognized it’s an extremely expensive medication and how disgusting if it turns out that this was a business decision for the JSO, that they would rather not pay for the medication. They would rather risk death over a business decision. It’s one of the most outrageous cases I’ve ever seen in this city of JSO misconduct.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact